



August 15, 2018

HLC Board of Trustees:

Please accept this letter as Morton College's response to the report of the July 16, 2018 IAC hearing.

At the onset, the College would like to affirm the essential quality assurance role of the HLC in higher education and the imperative of accreditation to the viability and vitality of the College. Simply put, Morton College would not exist without accreditation. There is no question that there are serious concerns among the trustees, administration, faculty, staff and students about the IAC report and the perceived level of severity of the issues surrounding the College's governance structure that led to the IAC's recommendation of a sanction of Probation.

The College has benefited immensely over the years from the recommendations of the various HLC peer review teams, which have consistently guided the College toward institutional improvement. The College views the findings and recommendations from this most recent evaluation cycle as another opportunity to learn and grow as an institution.

The College also acknowledges that its accreditation relationship with the HLC has been problematic for over a decade, notably through six college presidents during that period. Numerous HLC evaluation teams have cited significant concerns over inconsistencies on the part of the Board in adhering to clearly articulated board policies that refer to the role of the Morton College Board of Trustees as a policy-governing board and that of the College President as responsible for the day-to-day administration of the College.

The College is cognizant of the fact that when the HLC Board meets in November to make a final determination on the recommendations of the IAC, a mere acknowledgement of these seemingly intractable concerns about the challenges in institutional governance is not sufficient. The more crucial aspect of the institution's response should focus on how the Board together with the College President intend to ameliorate these concerns in a substantive and sustainable way and to the satisfaction of the Higher Learning Commission. To that end, the Morton College Board of Trustees has taken the following actions to date:

- At the May 8, 2018 special meeting of the Board, the Trustees unanimously approved a four-year contract extension for the President. This action demonstrated the Board's commitment to the continuity of leadership at the College.
- On the recommendation of the President, the College's CFO assumed the responsibilities of Treasurer. As a result, the College is no longer involved in the long-standing practice of engaging the services of an outside consultant for this function.
- Additionally, as noted in the IAC report, the College has fully launched a new five-year strategic plan adopted in January 2018, which has included an accelerated schedule to hire 15-20 full time faculty for the new academic year.



In addition to the aforementioned steps taken, the President will recommend to the Board the following:

1.) Termination of contractual agreements with two other vendors - Development and Marketing - at the August 22, 2018 special Board meeting. Numerous HLC evaluations since 2012 identified these particular contracts as areas of concern within the broader context of the role of the Board in relationship to the President and the process undertaken to determine the appropriate allocation of resources to support the work of the institution.

2.) Approval of the new administrative organizational structure at the August 22, 2018 special Board meeting. Board Policy 2.1 states: "the President will recommend the organizational structure of the College to the Board for approval, and, as circumstances require, any changes that will improve the overall College operations."

The Administration carefully vetted, discussed, and revised the proposed organizational structure through an inclusive process that involved input from all campus stakeholder groups over the past six months, including the Faculty Assembly and the various employee collective bargaining groups. The College Council - the campus-wide participatory governance group - endorsed the new organizational structure.

The proposed organizational structure was on the agenda at the May Board meeting for information and discussion. At the June Board meeting, the Board tabled a vote on the organizational structure with no explanation. At the July meeting, the board voted against the proposed structure 4-3 with no explanation.

3.) Board membership with AGB - Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges and regular utilization of the resources available through AGB for training and board development.

4.) Review and revise board policies that pertain to the protocols for how college employees communicate with the Board. Currently, the relevant policies state that employees shall communicate with the Board through the President. Further clarification on this policy is necessary to include, not only regular employees of the College, but also consultants, contractors and vendors. These changes will specifically address the concerns identified in the IAC report regarding the interactions between legal counsel and the College and will clarify the appropriate communication expectations of this relationship.

5.) Effective with the August Board meeting, the Board will return to its original Board meeting schedule of the 4th Wednesday of the month at 5 p.m. The alternating times from month-to-month of the Board meeting schedule over the past year have caused confusion and inefficiency in the development of Board meeting agendas. A consistent meeting time will also enhance transparency.

6.) Ongoing and candid discussions around the sensitive subject of the proper boundaries of the Board's role in governance and appropriate interactions among the Trustees at and outside of Board meetings. It is important to ensure that all stakeholders of the College are confident that the vital work of the Board occurs in a collaborative and respectful manner.





A starting point for these crucial conversations is the groundbreaking research of Dr. Terry O'Banion, the preeminent scholar and community college thought-leader, who published the results of his extensive research several years ago in a lengthy monograph "The Rogue Trustee: The Elephant in the Room." Dr. O'Banion gave voice to a growing phenomenon across the country in community college board governance. He also shared his findings during a keynote address at the Annual HLC Conference a few years ago. The following is an excerpt from Dr. O'Banion's article:

"Rogue Trustees run roughshod over the norms and standards of behavior expected of public officials appointed or elected to office. They tend to trample over the ideas and cautions of the CEO, the trustee chair, and member trustees. They place their own interests over the interests of the college. They violate written and unwritten codes of conduct. They often make inappropriate alliances with faculty, staff, and other trustees. They recommend and support policies that are not in the best interests of the institution. They consume an inordinate amount of staff and meeting time. They know how to get attention, to appeal to the base elements in others, and to manipulate individuals and situations to their advantage. Most rogue trustees are bright and articulate...they are sometime loners...but they also create alliances with others to carry out their agenda...they tend to poison the culture of the college instead of helping to create a sense of community, collaboration, innovation, and common values. They become the catalyst for increased defensiveness, paranoia, subterfuge, and fear. In short, they cause enormous damage. The rogue trustee is the elephant in the room, creating an ever-widening circle of frustration and destruction for anything in its path."

Guided by the leadership of a strong board chair, ongoing discussions and assessment focused on the qualities and practices that contribute to an informed, independent, deliberative and collaborative trustee can serve as a framework for regular training for the Board.

The College looks forward to providing an update to the HLC Board before its meeting in November on the actions taken by the Morton College Board of Trustees in response to these recommendations. Please note that the Trustees have included their signatures on this letter to indicate their acknowledgement of the gravity of the consequences facing the College's accreditation relationship with the HLC and commitment to the welfare of the institution through strict adherence to Board policies.

However challenging and disconcerting these circumstances may be for everyone involved, the College is wholeheartedly committed to its vital mission and to addressing HLC's concerns through a transparent and intentional process of continuous and measurable progress. In doing so, given that the scope of the IAC concerns is limited to board governance issues, the College respectfully requests that the HLC Board not impose the sanction of Probation on the institution, as was the recommendation of the Focused Visit Team.

Sincerely,  
Morton College

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President



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